

The Vikings Are Coming!

by John-Erik Jordan

139 Old Norse Words That Invaded The English Language

When I say “Old English” what comes to mind? The ornate, hard-to-read script? Reading Beowulf in your high school English class? The kinds of figurative compound nouns – or [kennings](#) – like “swan of blood” and “slaughter-dew” that have sustained heavy metal lyrics for decades?

Old English, also known as Anglo-Saxon, was a language spoken by the Angles and the Saxons – the first [Germanic tribes](#) to settle the British Isles. They were not the first inhabitants, as any Welsh or Gaelic speaker will tell you, but their language did form the basis for the *Angle-ish* we speak today. But then why can't we modern-day English speakers understand Old English? In terms of vocabulary, grammar and syntax, Old English resembles its cousins Dutch and German more than it does modern English. So how did English change so drastically?

The short answer is that the English language changed forever after the Norman invasion brought a new ruling class of French speakers to the British Isles in 1066. French was the language of the nobility for the next 300 years – plenty of time for lots of French words to trickle down to the merchant and peasant classes. For example, the Anglo-Saxons already had words for “sheep” and “cows”, but the Norman aristocracy – who usually only saw these animals on the plate – introduced *mouton* (mutton) and *boeuf* (beef). Today, nearly thirty percent of English words come from French.

As a result, modern English is commonly thought of as a West Germanic language with lots of French and, thanks to the church, Latin influence. But this history of English's development leaves out a very important piece of the linguistic puzzle – Old Norse: the language of the Vikings.

How To Speak Viking

The Old Norse noun *viking* meant an overseas expedition, and a *vikigr* was someone who went on one of these expeditions. In the popular imagination, the Vikings were essentially pirates from the fjords of Denmark and Norway who descended on medieval England like a bloodthirsty frat party; they raped, pillaged, murdered, razed villages and then sailed back across the North Sea with the loot.

But the truth is far more nuanced. The earliest Viking activity in England did consist of coastal raids in the early ninth century, but by the 870s the Danes had traded sword for plow and were settled across most of Northern England in an area governed by treaties known as the [Danelaw](#). England even had [Danish kings](#) from 1018 to 1042. However, the more successful and longer-lasting Norman conquest in 1066 marked the end of the Viking era and virtually erased Danish influence in almost all aspects of English culture but one: its effect on the development of the English language.

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Traust me, *þó* (though) it may seem *oddi* at first, we *er* still very *líkligr* to use the *same* words as the Vikings did in our everyday speech. *Þeirra* (their) language evolved into the modern-day Scandinavian languages, but *þeir* (they) also gave English the *gift* of hundreds of words.

[A note on the letter þ: the Old Norse letter, called thorn, makes the same sound as the “th” in “thin”.]

Names of Days

The most obvious Viking influence on modern English is the word **Thursday** (*Þorsdagr*), which you can probably guess means “Thor’s day”.

“Tuesday”, “Wednesday” and “Friday” are sometimes also attributed to the Norse gods Tyr, Odin and Freya, respectively; but the days are actually named for the Anglo-Saxon equivalents of these gods, Tiw, Wodan and Friga. The similarity of these names points to the common ancestry of the various Germanic tribes in prehistoric northern Europe – centuries before their descendants clashed on England’s shores.

War & Violence

If the Vikings are famous for one thing, it’s their obsession with war. They didn’t just bring death and destruction to England in the Middle Ages, they brought really cool words for death and destruction. They were certainly a rough bunch. Just look at a Viking the *rangr* way, and he might *þrysta* (thrust) a *knifr* into your *skulle*.

- **berserk/berserker** – *berserkr*, lit. ‘bear-shirt’. A berserkr was a Viking warrior who would enter battle in a crazed frenzy, wearing nothing for armor but an animal skin.
- **club** – *klubba*. People have been bashing each other with heavy things since time immemorial, but not until the Danes started bringing this weapon down on English heads did this blunt weapon receive its fittingly blunt name.
- **ransack** – *rannsaka* (to search a house)
- These days, the adjective **scathing** is reserved for sharp criticism, but in the context of the original meaning of **scathe** (to injure), *skaða* takes on a much more visceral quality.
- **slaughter** – *slatra* (to butcher)
- Even though the **gun** wasn’t invented until centuries after the Viking era, the word comes from Old Norse. The most common usage was in the female name *Gunnhildr*: *gunn* and *hildr* both can translate as “war” or “battle”. Only truly badass Vikings named their infant daughters “Warbattle”.

Society & Culture

But life in the Danelaw wasn’t all murder and mayhem. Ironically, these savage berserkers also gave us words that are central to our “civilized” culture:

bylaw – *bylög* (village-law)

heathen – *heiðinn* (one who inhabits the heath or open country)

sale – *sala*

skill – *skil* (distinction)

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Hell – In Norse mythology, Loki’s daughter *Hel* ruled the underworld.

husband – *hús* (house) + *bóndi* (occupier and tiller of soil) = *húsbóndi*

law – *lag*

litmus – *litr* (dye) + *mosi* (lichen; moss)

loan – *lán* (to lend)

saga

steak – *steik* (to fry)

thrall – *þræll* (slave)

thrift – *þrift* (prosperity)

tidings – *tíðindi* (news of events)

troll

yule – *jol* (a pagan winter solstice feast)

Animals

Although most English animal names retain their Anglo-Saxon roots (cow, bear, hound, swine, chicken, etc) the Vikings did bring certain animal names into the vernacular:

- **bug** – *búkr* (an insect within tree trunks)
- **bull** – *boli*
- **reindeer** – *hreindyri*
- **skate** – *skata* (fish)
- **wing** – *vængr*

Some words associated with hunting and trapping also come from Old Norse. **Sleuth** now means “detective”, but the original *slóth* meant “trail” or “track”. **Snare**, on the other hand, retains the original meaning of O.N. *snara*.

The Landscape

Old Norse is good at describing *bleikr* landscapes and weather. This was especially useful in the Vikings’ adopted northern England, where *flatr* or *rogg* (rugged) terrain can be shrouded in *fok*, and oppressed by *gustr* of wind and *lagr* (low) *ský* (clouds).

Much of the Danelaw bordered swamps and alluvial plains, so it’s no surprise that many Norse words for dirty, mucky things survive in English:

- **dirt** – *drit* (excrement)
- **dregs** – *dregg* (sediment)
- **mire** – *myrr* (bog)
- **muck** – *myki* (cow dung)
- **rotten** – *rotinn*

The Norse Legacy in English

Thanks to the cross-cultural fermentation that occurred in the Danelaw – and later when England was temporarily absorbed into [Canute the Great’s](#) North Sea Kingdom – the English language is much closer to that of its Scandinavian neighbors than many acknowledge. By the time that the

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Norman conquest brought the irreversible influence of French, Old English had already been transformed beyond its Anglo-Saxon roots.

This is still in evidence today; modern English grammar and syntax are more similar to modern Scandinavian languages than to Old English. This suggests that Old Norse didn't just introduce new words, but influenced how the Anglo-Saxons constructed their sentences. Some [linguists even claim](#) that English should be reclassified as a North Germanic language (along with Danish, Norwegian and Swedish), rather than a West Germanic language (with Dutch and German). The Viking influence may be most apparent in the [Yorkshire dialect](#), which uses even more Norse words in daily speech than standard English does.

English is probably too much of a hybrid to ever neatly classify, but its Old Norse *rót* is clearly there among the tangle of Anglo-Saxon, French and Latin roots. The language of the Vikings may have become subdued over the centuries, but make no *mistaka* about it – from *byrðr* (birth) *undtil* we *deyja* (die) – Norse's raw energy simmers under the surface of everything we say.

More Norse Words

VERBS

bark – *bqrkr*

bask – *baðask* (reflexive of *baða*, “to bathe”)

billow – *bylgja*

blunder – *blundra* (to shut one's eyes; to stumble about blindly)

call – *kalla* (to cry loudly)

cast – *kasta* (to throw)

choose – *kjósa*

clip – *klippa* (to cut)

crawl – *krafla* (to claw)

gawk – *ga* (to heed)

get – *geta*

give – *gefa*

glitter – *glitra*

haggle – *haggen* (to chop)

hit – *hitta* (to find)

kindle – *kynda*

race – *rás* (to race, to move swiftly)

raise – *reisa*

rid – *rythja* (to clear land)

run – *renna*

scare – *skirra*

scrape – *skrapa*

snub – *snubba* (to curse)

sprint – *spretta* (to jump up)

stagger – *stakra* (to push)

stain – *steina* (to paint)

stammer – *stemma* (to hinder or dam up)

sway – *sveigja* (to bend; to give way)

take – *taka*

seem – *sæma* (to conform)

shake – *skaka*

skip – *skopa*

thwart – *pvert* (across)

want – *vanta* (to lack)

whirl – *hvirfla* (to go around)

whisk – *viska* (to plait or braid)

OBJECTS

axle – *öxull* (axis)

loft – *lopt* (air, sky; upper room)

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VERBS

bag – *baggin*

ball – *bǫllr* (round object)

band (rope)

bulk – *bulki* (cargo)

cake – *kaka*

egg

glove – *lofi* (middle of the hand)

knot – *knutr*

keel – *kjölr*

link – *hlenkr*

mug – *mugge*

plow, plough – *plogr*

raft – *raptr* (log)

scale (for weighing) – *skal* (bowl, drinking cup)

scrap – *skrap*

seat – *sæti*

skirt – *skyrta* (shirt)

wand – *vondr* (rod)

window – *vindauga* (lit. “wind-eye”)

ADJECTIVES

aloft – *á* (on) + *lopt* (loft; sky; heaven)

ill – *illr* (bad)

loose – *lauss*

sly – *sloegr*

scant – *skamt* (short, lacking)

ugly – *uggligr* (dreadful)

weak – *veikr*

THE BODY

freckles – *freknur*

foot – *fótr*

girth – *gjörð* (circumference)

leg – *leggr*

skin – *skinn* (animal hide)

PEOPLE

fellow – *felagi*

guest – *gestr*

kid – *kið* (young goat)

lad – *ladd* (young man)

oaf – *alfr* (elf)

EMOTIONS

anger – *anгр* (trouble, affliction)

awe – *agi* (terror)

happy – *happ* (good luck; fate)

irk – *yrkja* (to work)